STRATEGIC USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING FOR THE TOURISM INDUSTRY: A CASE STUDY OF THAILAND

by

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ABSTRACT

Social networks are internet applications that connect groups of people together in online environments in order to share information (text, graphics, and videos) with communities via social media websites. The aim of this paper is to present strategic uses of social networking for the tourism industry using a case study of Thailand. The study was drawn from data collected from tourism business firms (490 samples) in Thailand through questionnaires and interviews. The results found that 40.61 percent of tourism business firms had websites to provide information and 43.06 percent used social networking in business. The purposes of using social networking in the tourism business were supported through online marketing and supported customer relationship management. The strategic use of social networking for the tourism industry is the '3C2P' model. The 3Cs consist of customer, content and campaigns and the 2Ps consist of people and platforms. The tourism business should target groups of customers that always use social networks, provide informative and attractive content, engage customers with campaign updates and maintain social relationships, and select the appropriate networking platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Trip Advisor.

KEYWORDS
Social Networks, Tourism, Customer Relationship Management

INTRODUCTION

Social networks are internet applications that connect groups of people together in online environments in order to share information (text, graphics, and videos) with communities via social media websites. Social networks are internet-based applications that carry consumer-generated content which encompass media impressions created by users, which provide information relevant to their experience, and are archived or shared online for easy access by other impressionable consumers (Blackshaw, 2006; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Since more and more travelers seem to tap into the collaborative intelligence that is available on the web (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), the challenge is that it established marketing practices of many tourism business and destinations (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).
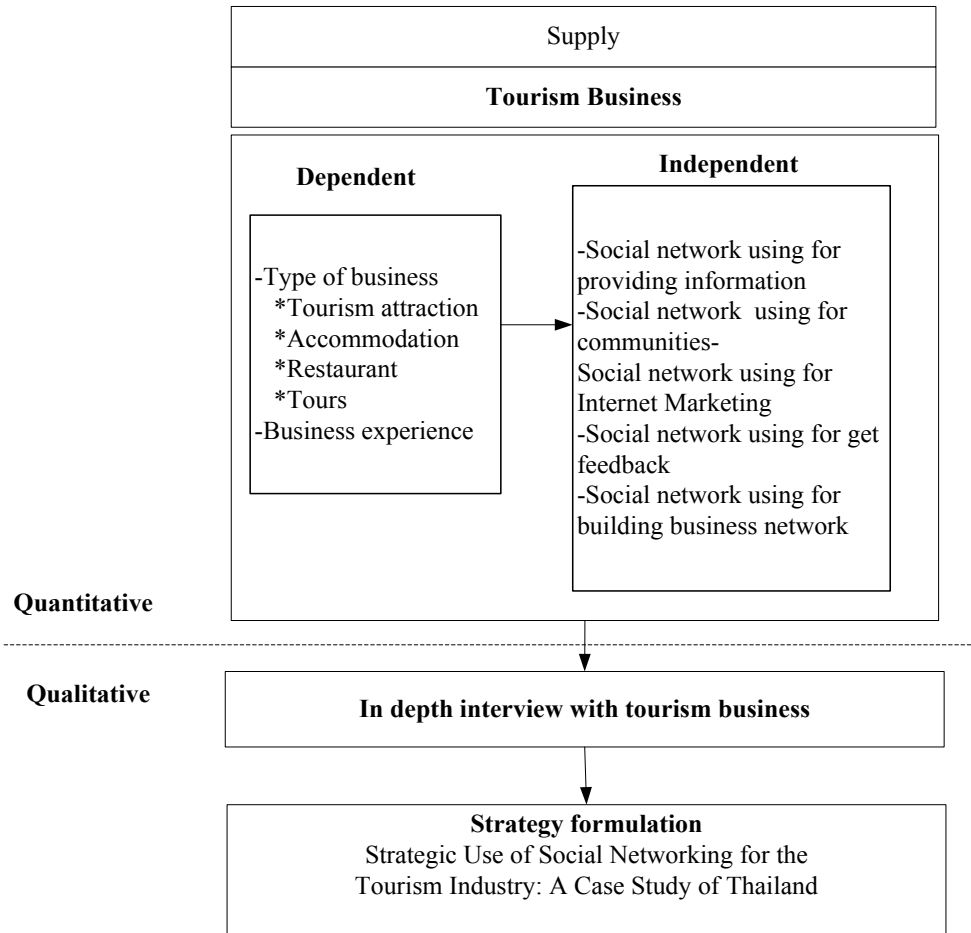
Social network applications have emerged that substantially add to the information exchange among travelers. Nowadays, Web 2.0 technology in tourism includes social networks and content syndication, mash-ups, tagging, wikis, web forums, virtual worlds, podcasting, blogs and online videos (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). However, research has indicated blogs created on social networks share new experiences and are considered trustworthy to online travelers (Braun-LaTours, Grinley, & Loftus, 2006; Mack, Blose, & Pan, 2008; Pan, MacLaurin et al., 2007; Purhing & Taylor, 2008; Waldhor & Rind, 2008).

The aim of this paper is to present strategic uses of social networking for the tourism industry using a case study of Thailand**.**

METHODOLOGY

This study uses mix methodology by integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Figure 1 shows the research framework.

FIGURE 1
RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Supply
Tourism Business

Dependent

Independent

-Type of business
  *Tourism attraction
  *Accommodation
  *Restaurant
  *Tours
-Business experience

-Social network using for providing information
-Social network using for communities-
Social network using for Internet Marketing
-Social network using for get feedback
-Social network using for building business network

Quantitative

Qualitative

In depth interview with tourism business

Strategy formulation Strategic Use of Social Networking for the Tourism Industry: A Case Study of Thailand

* Note SN = Social Network

Quantitative approach

Population and sample

This study collected data from 500 samples by using questionnaires. The population was tourism business companies in Thailand as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
POPULATION AND SAMPLE OF TRAVELERS

Tourism business	Population	Sample**
Accommodation	253,383	330
Tours/Restaurant/Spa	56,953	170
Total	**310,336**	**500**

Note   * Taroyame (1973, P 1088), confidence level at 95%
       ** Increased number of samples to be more confident

Tools validity

The questionnaire consisted of 3 parts: part 1 — demographic of the tourism business, part 2 — social network using for tourism business, and part 3 — comments.

Data analysis

Data was analyzed by using descriptive statistics.

Qualitative approach

Data was collected from in-depth interviews from samples in the tourism business. The strategy was formulated by using SWOT analysis, and the data was analyzed by using content analysis.

FIGURE 2
DATA COLLECTION FROM QUALITATIVE STUDY

RESULTS

Quantitative results

Social network usage in the tourism business

1) The result of social network usage in business is shown in Table 1-4.

TABLE 1
FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF SOCIAL NETWORK USAGE IN THE TOURISM BUSINESS

Social network	Frequency	Percentage
1. Website of the business		
- Yes	199	40.61
- No	291	59.39
2. Social network of the business		
- Yes	211	43.06
- No	279	56.94
3. Plan to use social networks in the future		
- Yes	149	30.41
- No	124	25.31
- Uncertainly	217	44.29

The results from Table 1 show that 40.61 percent of tourism businesses have websites, 43.06 percent use social networks, and 30.41 percent plan to use social networks in the future.

TABLE 2
OBJECTIVES OF USING SOCIAL NETWORKS FOR THE TOURISM BUSINESS

Objectives of using social networks	M	S.D.
1. Providing information	2.12	1.12
2. Communication with customers	2.46	1.16
3. Marketing	2.32	1.16
4. Receiving feedback from customers	2.56	1.20
5. Building customer networks	2.48	1.23
6. Brand building	2.49	1.20
7. Increasing profits	2.45	1.24
8. Customer relationship management	2.31	1.18
Overall	2.40	1.19

The results from Table 2 show that the objectives of using social networks for the tourism business ranked from using social networks to receive feedback from customers ($M = 2.56$), to build their brand ($M = 2.49$), to build their customer networks ($M = 2.48$) and finally to provide information ($M = 2.12$) respectively.

TABLE 3
CURRENT SOCIAL NETWORK USAGE BY TOURISM BUSINESSES

Type of social network website	M	S.D.
1. Facebook	2.76	1.73
2. Twitter	1.69	1.30
3. Hi5	1.41	1.07
4. YouTube	2.21	1.62
5. TripAdvisor	1.41	1.06
Overall	1.77	1.41

The results from Table 3 show that tourism businesses used social network websites, ranking from Facebook ($M = 2.76$), YouTube ($M = 2.21$), Twitter ($M = 1.69$) and finally Hi5 ($M = 1.41$) respectively.

TABLE 4
PROBLEMS FOR TOURISM BUSINESSES IN USING SOCIAL NETWORKS

Type of social network website	M	S.D.
1. Customers didn't use the businesses' social networks	3.39	1.22
2. Lack of knowledge on how to use social networks	3.28	1.29
3. Not necessary to use social networks	3.50	1.24
4. Lack of staff knowledge on how to use social networks	3.25	1.32
5. Don't have a computer	3.56	1.33
Overall	3.40	1.28

The results from Table 4 show that the problems for tourism businesses of using social networks ranked from tourism businesses not having a computer ($M = 3.56$), not necessary to use social network ($M = 3.50$), Customer didn't use social network ($M = 3.39$) and finally lack of staff knowledge on how to use social networks ($M = 3.25$).

Qualitative results

SWOT analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
1. Social networks can create added value for tourism businesses. 2. Number of social network users is increasing. 3. Social networks are popular among travelers. 4. Social networks can provide valuable contents with any platform. 5. Marketing campaigns can be set up easier by using social networks.	1. Lack of staff knowledge on how to use social networks. 2. Some tourism businesses did not have computer hardware. 3. Some tourism businesses were not required to use social networks.
Opportunities	**Threats**
1. Great opportunity for individuals and organizations to connect and exchange information. 2. Reach new target or niche markets. 3. Campaign, news, and events can be offered through social network platforms. 4. Partnerships with other groups and organizations.	1. Competitors are going after the same space or same audience with similar campaign. 2. A more lax attitude on privacy means everyone is willing to share the most intimate as well as mundane details of their lives. 3. There is a danger from spam and porn spam.

Strategic use of social networking for the tourism industry

The strategic use of social networking for the tourism industry is the '3C2P' model. The 3Cs consist of customer, content and campaigns and the 2Ps consist of people and platforms.

FIGURE 3
SOCIAL NETWORKING STRATEGY
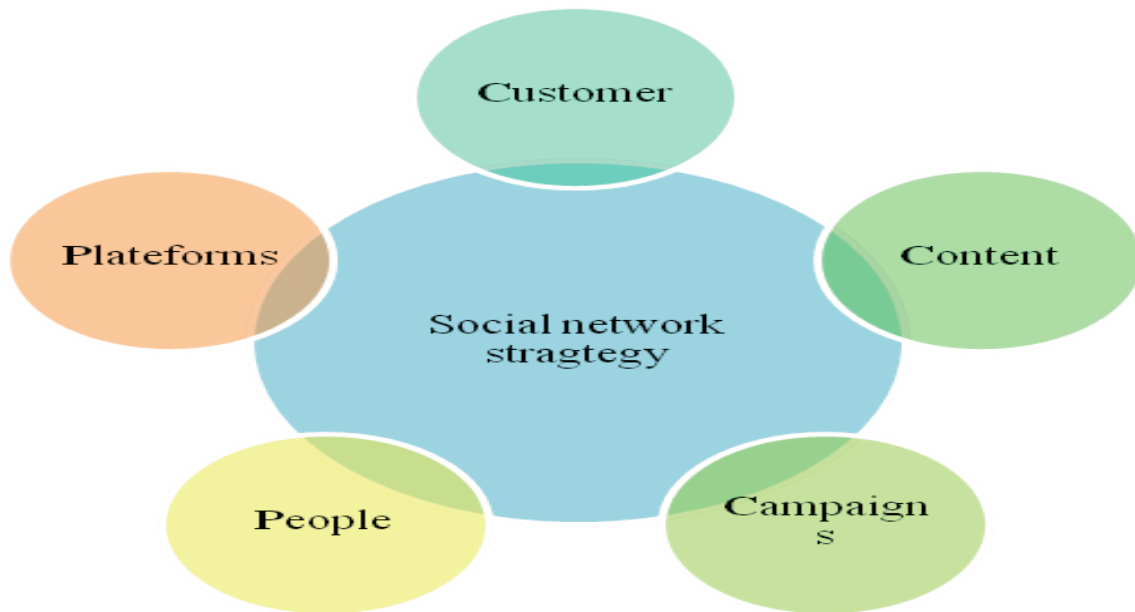
1) **C**ustomer
   Building customer relationships and added value by using social networks, such as for sending birthday discount vouchers to stay at the accommodation for 50% off.
2) **C**ontents
   Provide informative, useful and attractive content on social networks' web sites.
3) **C**ampaigns
   Engage customers with new campaigns.
4) **P**eople
   Educate staff in tourism business to use social networks and the latest communication and information technology.
5) **P**latform
   Design social networks to support every platform.

CONCLUSION

Social networking is becoming more attractive for use by the tourism business. Therefore, the tourism business should use social networking through online marketing and supported customer relationship management. The strategic use of social networking for the tourism industry is the '3C2P' model. The 3Cs consist of customer, content and campaigns and the 2Ps consist of people and platforms. The tourism business should target groups of customers that always use social networks, provide informative and attractive content, engage customers with campaign updates and maintain social relationships, and select appropriate networking platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Trip Advisor.

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